

Greenhouse threat grows, Sierra Club chief warns

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Body

Coastlines that move inland. A semi-arid Midwestern breadbasket. Water wars out West.

Those are some of the scenarios sketched by experts who believe that the Earth is warming up like a greenhouse from our manmade pollution and the destruction of tropical forests.

There's no doubt greenhouse gases are building up, said Sierra Club Chairman Michael McCloskey. "The questions are how much warming will occur, over what period of time and whether it is conclusively established that we have broken out of the normal band of variation and average temperatures."

McCloskey believes recent research indicates we may have broken from those historical temperature variations.

He cited a recent report by scientific experts in the leading industrial nations, which says the increase in gases will raise the global mean temperature by more than three degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the next century.

That sort of increase would mean hotter days and more uncomfortable weather for most people in the USA, McCloskey said, but also much worse.

"It will probably lead to more drastic weather patterns. More tornadoes and hurricanes, and of greater severity. Our breadbasket will dry out with less rainfall, become more semi-desert and the price of food will probably rise."

The South would become semi-tropical. A third of Florida and "a whole strip along the Atlantic seaboard might disappear."

Diversion of Rocky Mountain rivers to meet economic and public needs will add to tensions between states in that region, McCloskey said.

"California is in its third year of severe drought, and that will probably get worse. Water wars will increase there."

While it hasn't been conclusively shown that recent weather problems are related to warming, McCloskey said, "we certainly have the fact that four of the five hottest years have been in the '80s, and some of the most severe hurricanes have been in the '80s."

Such things, he said, are seen by some scientists as "the first signs" of global warming.

The USA can't solve the global warming problem by itself, McCloskey said. "But we have to take care of our own problems before we can be persuasive in leading anybody else."

Notes

Accompanies; Topic; PROTECTING EARTH; This experiment with the planet is dangerous

Graphic

PHOTO; b/w, Susan Bascomb (Michael McCloskey)

CUTLINE: McCloskey

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